

## City should create safe drug injection site

This past year there were 122 heroin-related deaths in Oregon, with 80 in Portland's tri-county area. According to county officials, heroin use in our city has increased steadily over the past few years.

Heroin-related deaths have gone from double digits in the 1980s and early 1990s to more than 100 annually during the past two decades.

It appears Portland's long love affair with heroin has grown more intense – and more deadly – over the years.

And the homeless population is hit hardest. While people

experiencing homelessness make up less than 1 percent of Multnomah County's total population, they accounted for 25 percent of heroin-related deaths in the county in 2014.

In recent months, public drug injection has been on a list of complaints citizen and business groups cite when applying pressure to City Hall to find solutions for Portland's highly visible homeless population. The abundance of improperly discarded needles dotting our downtown landscape have also drawn criticism and been the subject of several TV news reports this year.

Multnomah County has acted as a national leader in harm reduction, adopting various policies over the years, from syringe exchange to wide distribution of naloxone, an overdose reversing drug that has helped save lives.

These programs place compassion above criminalization and serve as long-term solutions to reducing recidivism and addiction.

As local government struggles to balance the demands of social service agencies and downtown businesses, Street Roots urges both the city and the Multnomah

County Health Department to allocate additional resources toward implementing next-level harm reduction strategies when thinking about how to get a handle on widespread heroin use in downtown Portland.

While it wouldn't be a fix-all, Street Roots believes one approach would address many problems associated with intravenous drug use in our city's center: establishing a supervised injection site.

Numerous peer-reviewed studies have shown supervised injection sites significantly reduce public drug use and deaths from overdose, while increasing enrollment in drug treatment programs among intravenous drug users. Injection sites also reduce the number of improperly discarded needles.

Operating in Europe, Canada and Australia, these sites generally offer a dedicated space where intravenous drug users can inject previously obtained drugs out of public view and under the supervision of medical professionals. Staff is there to intervene with life-saving measures in the event of an overdose and to provide further education. Most importantly, staff also provides counseling and a connection to resources when users are ready to quit – and quit they do. One study of Vancouver B.C.'s injection facility, Insite, found that before the study period ended, 23 percent of respondents had stopped injecting drugs, and another 57 percent had entered treatment.

Portland can continue to lead the nation in effective harm reduction policies by establishing the first supervised injection site in the United States. It's not a question of whether an injection site will help reduce heroin's impact on our city – it's a question of whether or not our city and county leaders and local law enforcement agencies have the courage to invest in and support a solution that works, even if it's controversial.

### EDITORIAL

## Housing crisis: The writing is on the wall

People experiencing homelessness having sex in a doorway in downtown Portland. A camp full of bicycle parts. A group of people getting high or shooting up in public. Another group with an abundance of trash overflowing from their shopping cart or the car they sleep in. Feces in the park. These are the images being posted by residents on social media to inspire government to create the political will to do something about the homeless problem in Portland. Shocking to some, unfortunate to others.

This comes after a public campaign by the Portland Business Alliance asking the city of Portland to support people experiencing homelessness with more resources.

Last week, Mayor Charlie Hales countered with a package to support people on the streets.

Two of the biggest components of the initiative are creating day storage spaces for people on the streets and investing nearly a million dollars to support some of our most vulnerable residents to get off the streets. Both are great things.

The other is to create a centralized point of contact so people can report aggressive behavior throughout the city.

Anyone that has read this column knows that I'm not afraid to criticize bad policy around homelessness and poverty, nor am I shy about saying when elected leaders are doing the right thing. The mayor's package was a good one and the city should be grateful. Saying that, it's still only applying a bandaid to a gaping wound. We hope next year's budget cycle is kinder than the last.

Here's the thing.

We all know that Portland is facing a housing crisis. The writing has been on the wall for sometime. What was once a conversation about the gentrification of people of color and people sleeping on our streets has now turned to, "How are middle-class Portlanders, many of whom are white ironically, going to afford to live in the city?" With rising housing costs and low-wages, it's very likely that social service workers, teachers and others will no longer

be able to afford to live in the city in the decade to come. In fact, San Francisco announced just this week that there is now a teacher shortage in the city due to the cost of living. We aren't far behind.

The black community and homeless advocates have been warning of this crisis for the past three decades. They were experiencing it.

How Portland can be praised for being one of the best planned urban environments in America with no affordable housing requirements is one of biggest myths of our time. Meanwhile, displacement and homelessness continue to occur at alarming rates within our community.

There are a lot of people getting rich. That's what happens in a free market that doesn't have any kind of regulations for rents, housing and wages. When one stops and think about the foreclosure crisis and the amount of residents that lost their homes during the recession coupled with the amount of people being displaced post-recession as the rental market has skyrocketed – you're talking about some very dire circumstances for people. Beneath all of the new business, condos and shine is an entire class of people surviving on the streets and living in extreme poverty. It's not pretty.

In fact, worlds are colliding. For every Twitter group organizing and posting photos of people experiencing homelessness having sex in a public park or reporting bike thefts, there is a Facebook group or coalition being formed out of fear of losing their housing.

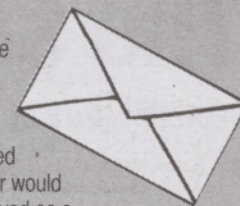
Meanwhile, somewhere in the middle of the debate we find both a bustling city and a city filled with human suffering.

There are no easy answers to the problems that lie ahead. Whatever it may be will require great leadership, political risk by all and an enormous lift by our community to address the problem.

Regardless of where you fall on the complex subject, one thing is for sure, Portland wants elected leaders to prioritize housing. I mean, after all, it isn't homeless people having sex or doing drugs that's the problem. It's the lack of housing that's the problem. Imagine having your behavior viewed 24/7. I'm sure it wouldn't be pretty.

### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



### Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.  
Portland, OR 97209  
503-228-5657  
Fax: 503-227-3117  
www.streetroots.org  
www.news.streetroots.org  
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m., Sat. and 7:30-11 a.m. Sun.

### Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots?  
Contact Israel Bayer at israel@streetroots.org

### Staff

**Executive Director** Israel Bayer  
israel@streetroots.org  
**Managing Editor** Joanne Zuhl  
joanne@streetroots.org  
**Vendor Coordinator** Cole Merkel  
cole@streetroots.org  
**Operations Director** Sarah Beecroft  
**Development Director** Sarah Cloud  
**Program Assistant** Scott Jackson, Jesuit Volunteer  
**Development Assistant** Ann-Derrick Gaillot  
**Reporters** Emily Green, Sue Zalokar, Ann-Derrick Gaillot, Sarah Hansell, Lenora Ko, Sam Bouman, Jared Paben  
**Photographers** Diego Diaz, Joe Glode  
**Canvasser** Desmond Hardison

### Board of Directors

**Chairman** Bruce Anderson  
**Vice-Chairman** Brad Taylor  
**Treasurer** Heather Stickdick  
**Secretary** Amber Bielmann  
**Directors** Rich Rodgers, Michael Anderson, Leo Rhodes, Nora Coon, Darren Alexander, Eddie Barbosa, Rachel Langford

### Volunteers

Jan Bayer, John Barker, Stacey Heath, Brian Ritchie, Anders Fredericksen, Stephanie Holm, Anjali Rathore, Sam Bouman, Joanna Chase, Zoe Klingmann, Haven Herrin, Eliese Baker, Dan Jones, Rob Shyrook, Tom Ray, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jessica Pollard, Lee Ko, James Yu, Siri Carlson, Diana Richardson, Sarah Wise, Cherie Manning

If you are interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or call our volunteer coordinator for more information at 503-228-5657.



### DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.